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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 001173

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PROP](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: EDITOR SUSPENDED FOR INTERVIEW PRAISING "UNIVERSAL VALUES" (RULE OF LAW AND DEMOCRACY)

REF: A. BEIJING 303

[¶](#)B. 07 BEIJING 7409

[¶](#)C. 06 BEIJING 8115

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson.  
Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary and Comment

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[¶](#)1. (C) Zhong Weizhi (protect), the editor-in-chief of China's only national-level "private" newspaper, The Economic Observer, was suspended for publishing an interview with a controversial historian, Zhong told PolOffs March 25. The historian in question, Sun Yat-sen University's Yuan Weishi, had apparently been black-listed by propaganda authorities. Zhong said Party censors were especially angry because Yuan had subsequently published an unedited version of the interview, in which he praised the "universal values" of democracy and human rights, on his own blog. Yuan's blog version had then been picked up by numerous websites. Other factors may have contributed to Zhong's suspension: the paper had recently interviewed several controversial figures, including Charter 08 signers, and Zhong reported that the Observer had come under increased political pressure since the outbreak of the global financial crisis, which had prompted some Chinese officials to criticize the newspaper's "rightist, free market" bias. Making matters worse, Zhong himself had refused to join the Communist Party. Comment: Although Zhong said he anticipated being reinstated, his "mistake" illustrates the challenges editors still face in attempting to identify the acceptable boundaries of media content. The example also illustrates the vulnerabilities of "private" newspapers, like the Observer, that lack strong political protectors. End Summary and Comment.

Editor-in-Chief Suspended

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[¶](#)2. (C) Zhong Weizhi (protect), the editor-in-chief of the prominent national weekly newspaper, The Economic Observer (Jingji Guancha Bao), told PolOffs on March 25 that an interview the paper had conducted with the controversial Guangdong province historian, Yuan Weishi, published March 16, had angered central propaganda authorities. As a result, Zhong had been temporarily suspended from his chief editor duties. Zhong was also required to write a self-criticism acknowledging that he had not exercised proper oversight of the paper and had not been aware that Yuan was a "bad person" (huai ren). He said he continued to work as chief editor during the ongoing investigation even though technically he was supposed to be at home. Cheng Mingxia (protect), the paper's editor of international news,

added that due to the suspension Zhong was no longer allowed to sign out pages under his name.

¶13. (C) Zhong predicted that the investigation would soon be over and that he would be reinstated, noting that such suspensions were a regular occurrence for editors. (Note: The Economic Observer has been in political trouble a number of times, and on at least one other occasion, one of Zhong's predecessors as chief editor was required to attend a self-criticism session. See ref B.) Zhong was appointed chief editor in August 2007, one of a handful of chief editors since The Economic Observer's founding in ¶2001.

#### Self-Censorship is Not Easy

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¶14. (C) Zhong and his editors had rigorously edited the offending interview with Yuan, as they always do with controversial authors, to ensure that politically sensitive content was removed and "forbidden zones" avoided. However, Zhong said, they underestimated the degree of political heat Yuan's name generates with propaganda authorities simply by appearing in print. In addition, unbeknownst to the Observer, Yuan had published the full content of the interview on his blog, retaining all of the original sensitive comments. The blog version prompted the censors' ire when it was widely circulated on the Internet. Zhong said that he was being punished mainly because of Yuan's blog, and

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for what Yuan represents to propaganda watchdogs, rather than the content of the interview as actually published in the Observer.

¶15. (C) (Note: This is not the first time that an article by Yuan, widely viewed as an influential, if provocative, historian at Guangzhou's Sun Yat-sen University, has resulted in the political censure of a newspaper (ref C). In January 2006, Freezing Point (Bing Dian), at the time an envelope-pushing supplement of the Communist Youth League paper China Youth Daily (Zhongguo Qingnian Bao), printed an article by Yuan that criticized the Party's official version of 19th-century Chinese history that appears in middle-school textbooks. The article prompted propaganda officials to order that Freezing Point cease publication for one month and that China Youth Daily demote the supplement's editor and deputy editor.)

#### The Interview

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¶16. (C) The Economic Observer has removed the published version of Yuan's interview from its website, though both the Observer's version and the unedited transcript published by Yuan were still available for download on other websites as of April ¶28. In the published version of the interview, Yuan blames "blind national arrogance" (mangmu de minzu zida) for China's inability to reform itself in the 19th and 20th centuries. Yuan praises the Declaration of Independence for recognizing "inalienable rights" of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and expresses optimism that China will continue towards rule of law, democracy and constitutional governance.

¶17. (C) In the blog version, in segments apparently edited out by The Economic Observer, Yuan goes further, arguing that China's modernization requires greater adoption of Western culture because "only

Western countries have achieved real modernization" through rule of law and democracy. Yuan also attacks those who criticize "universal values" (pushi jiazhi) as "ignorant" (yumei) and "uncultured" (mei wenhua). China has signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, all documents that embody universal values. Thus, Yuan argues, public criticism of universal values by Chinese officials harms China's image. All nine mentions of the term "universal values" by Yuan were removed in the published version.

Walking a Fine Line

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¶8. (C) Other factors may have contributed to propaganda authorities' strong reaction. The Economic Observer had been criticized recently for interviewing other "sensitive people," Zhong said. Zhong told PolOff he had been asked to remove politically sensitive comments from an interview the paper ran March 23 with Peking University Law Professor He Weifang, an outspoken legal activist who signed the Charter 08 pro-democracy manifesto. He's comments about why he had not been allowed to accept a faculty position in Zhejiang province recently and why he was now being assigned to Peking University's branch campus in distant Xinjiang region were especially sensitive, according to Zhong. (Note: Zhejiang University recently refused He Weifang a faculty position reportedly because of his political views and public persona. Shortly thereafter, Peking University "exiled" He Weifang by assigning him to teach at PKU's satellite school in far-west Xinjiang.) Zhong said there had never been any directive not to interview Charter 08 signers but the Propaganda Department did not want to see Charter 08 given more publicity.

¶9. (C) Although The Economic Observer is a business publication targeting China's professional, commercial and government elites, the paper enjoys a reputation for its provocative social commentary and its quiet, between-the-lines advocacy of political change. According to Zhong, the paper had experienced more political pressure than usual since

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the outbreak of the global financial crisis, which had caused some officials to criticize the kind of "rightist" market economics the Observer champions. Although the atmosphere had become harder, Zhong said, the paper would not change its stance due to this pressure. The financial crisis meant Keynesian economics was coming to the fore, he said, but "Keynes was not against markets."

¶10. (C) Zhong's lack of Party membership may also have contributed to his suspension. Zhong told PolOff he had been under considerable pressure to join the Party since his appointment as chief editor, but had no interest in doing so. Zhong explained that even though he was not a CCP member, he was subject to Party discipline as the editor of a paper that falls under the supervision of the Shandong Party Committee. (Note: The Observer is registered in Shandong Province, even though its editorial staff is located in Beijing.) Zhong said his suspension was a form of intra-Party punishment.

Comment

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¶11. (C) A former Renmin Ribao (People's Daily) editorial writer (who was himself removed for his outspoken pro-reform views) recently told PolOffs that he admired Zhong, whom he described as a well-known member of the "reform faction" who was "hated" by leftists for his aggressive promotion of liberal ideas (ref B). Although Zhong was confident he would be re-instated, his alleged "mistake" in the eyes of the censors illustrates the challenges editors face in attempting to identify the acceptable boundaries of media content. The example also illustrates the continuing political vulnerabilities of "private" newspapers like the Observer, which is owned by a business consortium in Shandong province. Unlike the influential private magazine Caijing, the Observer appears to have no strong political patron it can call on in times of political trouble.

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